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Internal strife reflected in Gila leader's suspension

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The suspension a week ago of the Gila River Indian Community's governor is bad news for Ahwatukee Foothills residents who hope the community will allow the South Mountain Freeway to be built on the reservation.

Gov. William Rhodes, a longtime businessman, had become the community's leading freeway proponent.

Rhodes is known to be pro-development. *The Arizona Republic* has learned that Rhodes is attempting to build a hotel, restaurant, gas station and convenience store on 7 acres he owns southeast of Interstate 10 and Riggs Road, a mile west of Sun Lakes, but that land is not likely to be impacted by the South Mountain Freeway. The freeway would be built west of I-10, linking the freeway to I-10 at a yet-to-be-determined point in the West Valley.

Since taking office in January, friction has been rising between him and the community's 17-member council, especially after he fired a bunch of longtime employees. He was called before the council in late March to answer a number of complaints. An internal audit was ordered.

"After extensive review, discussion and deliberation of the completed audit, the council voted on May 27, 2006, in open forum and on public record to suspend Governor Rhodes for three weeks without pay based on the findings of the Administration Audit," according to an official statement released by tribal officials Friday.

It is unclear whether Rhodes will have the political pull, especially after being suspended, to persuade the community to agree to even study the feasibility of allowing the freeway on the reservation.

Insiders say the suspension was not because Rhodes has promoted a freeway study but mostly because he is believed to have failed to follow official personnel and financial procedures. Of the 16 council members present, two opposed the suspension, according to tribal officials.

Lt. Gov. Jennifer Allison-Ray was named acting governor.

The community council in 2000 approved a resolution forbidding even a study of the proposed South Mountain Freeway on the reservation. Rhodes attempted twice recently to get the council to reconsider but couldn't get his proposal for a feasibility study past two necessary council committees.

During one meeting, Councilman John Antone said, "I don't know what part of 'no' they don't understand," referring to the governor's office.

Tribal spokeswoman Jeri Thomas then said the governor was going to try his second option, a citizens referendum. If a referendum petition is signed by 10 percent of the registered voters, or about 440 people, the feasibility study would be voted on in an election. That was about two weeks before the governor was

suspended.

Meanwhile, Matt Burdick, spokesman for the Arizona Department of Transportation, said the department continues to be willing to work with the Gila River community. He said ADOT recognizes that the community officially remains opposed to putting the freeway on the reservation. He said he couldn't say whether the governor's suspension would affect any discussions regarding the South Mountain Freeway.

"They are a critical agency for us to work with. There are a variety of transportation issues we will continue to work with them on, regardless of what happens," he said.

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